

# Promoting narrative CVs to improve research evaluation? A review of opinion pieces and experiments

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## Abstract

As the academic community has become increasingly concerned about the drifts of research evaluation, mostly researchers' evaluation, because of the overreliance on metrics, many expert groups have made recommendations to improve the way researchers should be evaluated. In this study, we focus on the recommendation to use narrative curriculum vitae (CVs). We review 28 opinion pieces and 7 experiments to better understand what a narrative CV can refer to, and to explore whether the narrative function that is specific to this kind of CV is proving effective in response to the concerns raised by evaluation practices. A close reading of these documents reveals the conceptual basis of the narrative CV and the problems it is intended to solve; we propose five commonly reported features of the narrative CV: avoid lists, contextualize achievements, fight metrics, enlarge the spectrum of contributions taken into consideration and foster diversity and inclusion. But the promoters of the narrative CV pay little to investigate how the narrative feature itself can lead to any benefits. However, the feedback collected from both applicants and evaluators is quite positive. Regardless of whether it is justified or not, the enthusiasm aroused by the implementation of this new type of CV undeniably has the advantage of opening up the debate, raising awareness and calling to question the bad practices and biases that exist in the researchers' assessment processes. The narrative nature of the CV is, in the end, just a pretext for raising interest and working towards the adoption of good practices.

**Keywords:** research evaluation; researcher assessment; responsible research assessment; narrative CV

## 1. Introduction

For over a decade, the academic community has become increasingly concerned about the drifts of research evaluation, mostly researchers' evaluation, because bibliometric indicators are overemphasized while research societal impact is not considered enough. Some important developments have drawn attention to the need to improve the current system for assessing researchers' achievements. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA members 2013) is the most important. The researchers who launched it criticized the increasing use of metrics for the evaluation of scientific research outputs, in particular the misuse of the impact factor. A few years later, the Leiden Manifesto followed the same line and stated that evaluation is 'increasingly driven by data and not by expert judgement' (Hicks et al. 2015). In the same year, the report 'The Metric Tide' (Wilsdon et al. 2015) produced by a group of independent experts had an international resonance, although it was initiated in a UK context. The report raises concerns 'that some quantitative indicators can be gamed' and called for the use of responsible metrics.

These same initiatives and many others have made recommendations to improve the way researchers should be evaluated. Recently, following the Open Science European Conference 2022, the Paris Call on Research assessment<sup>1</sup> and the subsequent agreement for reforming research assessment proposed by a coalition of organizations (Signatories of this Agreement 2022), invited to reform the current system of

research assessment by taking into account the full range of research outputs in all their diversity and evaluating them on their intrinsic merits and impact. In this study, we focus on the recommendation to use narrative CVs. A review of the scientific literature alone is not appropriate to provide an overview of this type of document, its use and its effectiveness, since to our knowledge there is no published research dedicated to narrative CVs. On the other hand, the recent interest of the scientific community in the narrative CV has generated many positions taken by researchers and experts in research evaluation, which can be found in opinion pieces, that is editorials, interviews, calls, comments, or blog posts. In addition, pilot projects have been launched by institutions and funders, and the feedback they have shared from these experiences is of great value and is included in our study. And of course, in our endeavour to understand what a narrative CV is and what role it can play in evaluation, we also draw on the scientific literature related to research evaluation to shed light on the CV as a particular type of document combined with the concept of narrativity.

The aim of this review is thus threefold:

- first, to understand what 'narrative CV' can refer to,
- also, to explore whether the narrative function that makes the specificity of this kind of CV is effective, in response to the concerns raised by evaluation practices,
- and eventually to discuss new perspectives for further studies on this type of CV.



attention to related activities that may have a positive societal impact. Therefore, we think that the narrative CV appears to be the ideal form of presentation of a scientific persona. Indeed, in the context of the history of science, according to [Herman \(2014\)](#), scholarly personae (*persona* is the Latin word for *mask*) are cultural identities that are characterized by ‘different constellations of virtues and skills, or more precisely by different constellations of commitments to goods (epistemic, moral, political, and so forth) the pursuit of which requires the exercise of certain virtues and skills’. [Cambon \(2021\)](#) explains that the concept of scientific personae, has undergone a change in meaning and that, beyond the presentation of all the achievements made by a researcher in order to adopt a public role, the concept also covers the widely shared views on what is required to be a scientist. And we think this is likely to influence candidates when they prepare their CV, insofar as they might be tempted to present their past achievements in such a way that they embody their potential future performance to perfectly fit the scientific persona representation. [Boudès, Cadin and Pralong \(2009\)](#) see also the CV as the inside-out story, that is the account that an individual gives of his or her life to others, as opposed to the inside story (intimate experiences) and the outside story (the events that actually occurred). They analyse a corpus of ‘traditional’ CVs and propose to determine the level of narrativity of each CV based on six formal properties that usually determine what constitutes a narrative: periodization (a marked beginning and end), a hero, a quest, a logic of progression, achievements and a moral. They conclude that the best CVs also have superior narrative qualities, as storytelling constitutes an easy way to create meaning and consistency.

Regarding CVs in list form, [Boudès, Cadin and Pralong \(2009\)](#), and also [Hamann and Kaltenbrunner \(2022\)](#) consider that lists have to be transformed back into narratives and that ‘the narrative agency rests with the evaluators’. In their analysis of referee reports (produced to legitimize hiring decisions in Swedish academia), [Hammarfelt et al. \(2020\)](#) show how the evaluators construct the ‘career trajectories’ by retrieving disparate pieces of information from the candidates’ CVs and transforming them in comparable entities. Thus, the use of CVs in the assessment process entails a trajectorial interpretation ([Kaltenbrunner and de Rijcke 2019](#); [Kaltenbrunner et al. 2021](#)), where evaluators have to contextualize the elements presented in the lists, relying on their own experience and epistemic culture, and make meaningful comparisons between candidates.

#### 4. How narrative CVs are presented and promoted

We identified 28 opinion pieces through queries in Google and Twitter. Those documents mention scientists’ point of view, including verbatims collected during interviews for newspapers or blogs. [Table 1](#) helps characterize the main actors promoting narrative CVs. We identified seven groups of actors whose views and statements are presented in five different types of papers; this information is presented in [Table 1](#) together with the reference of each paper.

A close reading of these papers reveals the conceptual basis of the narrative CV and the problems it is intended to solve. We present them in the following paragraphs by proposing five commonly reported features of the narrative CV:

- against the misuse of metrics
- against lists
- against a narrow definition of impact and in favour of a broader range of research contributions
- in favour of contextualization and selection
- in favour of inclusivity and diversification.

##### 4.1 Against the misuse of metrics

Very often, the promoters of the narrative CV see it as a way of fighting against the overreliance on metrics, and first and foremost against the misuse or abuse of the journal impact factor ([VSNU et al. 2019](#); [Directorate-General for Research and Innovation \(European Commission\) 2021](#); [Gadd 2022](#); [Woolston 2022](#)). The aim here is clearly to echo [DORA members \(2013\)](#), the Declaration On Research Assessment recognizing the need to improve the ways in which the outputs of scholarly research are evaluated. Indeed, bibliometric indicators are criticized for favouring quantity over quality and increasing the pressure on researchers to publish in high-impact journals whose value is inflated while other publication venues would have a greater societal impact ([Alberts et al. 2014](#); [Benedictus, Miedema and Ferguson 2016](#)).

##### 4.2 Against lists

The narrative CV is sometimes presented in opposition to the list CV, which is considered to be the traditional form, ignoring the former narrative format of the 1950s–60s CVs. The list CV is therefore criticized for favouring ‘shortcuts’ ([Curry et al. 2022](#); [Gadd 2022](#)) by taking advantage of the practical overview that lists offer but which results in ‘favouring snap judgements over in-depth evaluation’ ([Strinzel et al. 2021](#); [Brown et al. 2022](#)), and disadvantaging for example, researchers whose careers have been interrupted and whose ‘gaps’ appear without any further explanation in the CV. Going ‘beyond the lists’ with a narrative format enables a description not only of what was done but also of resulting achievements ([Metistalk 2022](#)).

##### 4.3 Against a narrow definition of impact and in favour of a broader range of research contributions

For the majority of the narrative CV advocates, its main asset is to broaden the range of contributions that researchers get recognition for, that is by going beyond research outputs and taking into account activities related to the research activity (i.e. scholarly activity that does not result in publications), ‘real-world contributions’ like projects that help local communities, outreach, work on committees, collaborating behind the scenes on big projects, teaching and supervision ([Lacchia 2021](#); [Gadd 2022](#); [Woolston 2022](#)).

##### 4.4 In favour of contextualization and selection

While fighting against simplistic metrics and broadening the array of accounted contributions, many see the narrative CV as a way to contextualize achievements ([Strinzel et al. 2021](#)) providing ‘a much richer, more nuanced picture of an individual scholar’s contribution’ ([Gadd 2022](#)) and to recognize and take into account discipline specificities, academic age and also personal circumstances.

Other stakeholders call for a selection of the most meaningful publications, rather than listing them all. This allows reviewers to have time to read them, makes it easier to compare early- and late-career researchers and makes career

**Table 1.** We have grouped the 28 identified opinion pieces into seven categories of actors. The table gives for each group, its category, the document types, the number of documents, and references

Actors	Document type	#	References
Advocacy coalitions	Blog posts	3	DORA funder discussion group (2022); Metistalk (2022); Spinal Cord Research Hub (2022)
	News, communication, events	1	UK Reproducibility Network (2021)
	Commitments, policies, rationales	1	Dementia Researcher (2022)
	Reports, case studies, surveys	1	Curry et al. (2022)
	Recommendations, principles, guidelines	1	Science Europe (2020)
Media	Blog posts	3	Cruz and de Jonge (2020); Brown et al. (2022); Gadd (2022)
	News, communication, events	3	Grove (2021a, 2021b); de Oliveira Andrade (2022)
Universities, university coalitions	News, communication, events	1	LERU (2022)
	Commitments, policies, rationales	3	VSNU et al. (2019); University of Bristol (2021); Eindhoven University of Technology (2022)
Researchers, scientific collaborators, research managers	Blog posts	1	Donald (2020)
	News, communication, events	3	Lacchia (2021); Chawla (2022); Woolston (2022)
Funders, funder coalitions	Commitments, policies, rationales	3	NWO (2019); Research Luxembourg (2021); UK Research and Innovation (2021)
Learned Societies and Research Organizations	Blog posts	1	The Royal Society (2019a)
	Recommendations, principles, guidelines	1	The Royal Society (2019b)
Governmental, inter-governmental or European sources	Reports, case studies, surveys	2	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission) (2021); UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021)
Total		28	

breaks less apparent (Strinzel et al. 2021; Curry et al. 2022; Woolston 2022).

#### 4.5 In favour of inclusivity and diversification

The public knowledge institutions and funders of research who have implemented the narrative CV, see this format (and the contextualization of achievements it enables) as a way of encouraging inclusivity by opening up to the diversification of career paths (Lacchia 2021) encouraged by the diversification of the criteria according to which research projects and careers are assessed (Grove 2021a; Gadd 2022). Metrics are then seen as a barrier to diversity, equity and inclusion. The opportunity to showcase mentorship, outreach and committee duties works in favour of women, people from minority ethnic groups and other under-represented demographics as these are areas where they excel (Bhalla 2019; Asaolu 2020).

### 5. Experiments with narrative CVs

Through reading the opinion pieces, we could identify real experiments, that is initiatives that tested the use of the narrative CV in a real situation, described it and sometimes also shared their evaluation of the experimentation after having collected feedback from both applicants and reviewers. Table 2 shows the seven experiments on which we have relied and who led them.

The earliest of these experiments was conducted in 2015 by the NIH and the NSF in the US, which, while not mentioning

narrative CVs (the term probably not being in common parlance yet in academic context), called for the inclusion of narrative elements in CVs used for NIH and NSF grants (Rockey 2014). In 2018, the Dutch Research Council (NWO) piloted a narrative CV format in the Veni scheme dedicated to funding Early-Career Researchers (Gossink-Melenhorst 2019).

It was under the leadership of the Royal Society that pilot experiments multiplied, following the publication of the Résumé for Researchers (R4R) ‘intended to be a flexible tool that can be adapted to a range of different processes that require a summative evaluation of a researcher, recognising that their relative importance will be context-specific’ (The Royal Society 2019a). The R4R template highlights past performance inviting the candidate to present himself/herself by answering four questions, also called modules:

- Module 1. How have you contributed to the generation of knowledge?
- Module 2. How have you contributed to the development of individuals?
- Module 3. How have you contributed to the wider research community?
- Module 4. How have you contributed to broader society?

It is mainly funding bodies that develop the process but also employers as universities (Adams et al. 2021; Meadmore et al. 2022). They take over the template and often adapt it to



**Table 2.** Recent actual experiments with narrative CVs considered in this section

Year	Actor	Type of actor	Description
2015	US National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF)	Funders, funder coalitions	Modification of the biosketch format in grant application forms
2018	Dutch Research Council (NWO)	Funders, funder coalitions	Introduction of the narrative CV in the Veni scheme (funding for Early-Career Researchers)
2019	Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)	Funders, funder coalitions	Introduction of the narrative CV for all funding calls
2020	Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)	Funders, funder coalitions	Test of the SciCV format
2021	Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR)	Funders, funder coalitions	Introduction of a narrative CV template for PIs (Principal Investigators) and Co-PIs requesting funding from all programmes
2021	UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Joint Funders Group (JFG)	Funders, funder coalitions	Introduction of a narrative CV for all funding applications
2021	University of Glasgow	Universities, university coalitions	Project with 8 early career researchers (ECRs) and a mock review panel to pilot a narrative CV format

their needs. They also describe their experimentation and also share the evaluation they carried out.

To learn from these experiments and further develop the analysis we initiated with the study of opinion pieces, it is necessary to consider again each of the five main features generally used to promote narrative CVs that is avoid lists, contextualize achievements, fight metrics, enlarge the spectrum of contributions taken into consideration and foster diversity and inclusion. These experiments are important and the feedback shared by the institutions that conducted them is valuable as it allows us to go beyond the (sometimes promissory) discourse and access the practical application.

### 5.1 Avoid lists

From a morphological point of view, it appears that the use of lists is not completely rejected. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) has indeed designed a template ‘neither as a list-based nor a purely free-text-based CV, but instead aimed at combining the best of both worlds’ (Strinzel et al. 2022). The University of Glasgow also advocates a ‘hybrid CV’ (Adams et al. 2021; Adams and Casci 2021) which appears to be the preferred format for respondents over an entirely narrative-based CV.

### 5.2 Contextualize achievements

For all projects, the overall principle remains to provide key outputs and to put them into context, with an instruction to use a maximum number of words (Joint Funders Group 2022; Strinzel et al. 2022), or of cited publications or research achievements (DORA members 2020).

But the omission of the full publication list was ambivalently received by both applicants and reviewers (FNR 2022; Strinzel et al. 2022). There are concerns that not listing the full list of publications provides an incomplete profile of the candidate and that reviewers also lack evidence to verify what is claimed in the narratives. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted by the SNSF with the reviewers show that ‘they appreciated the contextualising aspect of narratives for their evaluation, as they provide an overview of scientific careers

and connections that are not discernible from publication lists only’ (Strinzel et al. 2022).

### 5.3 Fight metrics

As for metrics, there is no complete or generalized ban here either, but restricted and contextualized use. The University of Glasgow, for example, accepts contextualized citation data. Although the NWO (Gossink-Melenhorst 2019) has banned the use of the h-index or the impact factor, it has nevertheless authorized the use of metrics for key outputs only, provided that it is specified why this indicator is interesting. For the SNSF SciCV, as the platform is connected to the Dimensions bibliographic database, the Relative Citation Ratio is automatically retrieved to populate the CV and the h-index is added according to the Scopus database calculation (Strinzel et al. 2022). These two metrics have not been perceived with great enthusiasm but, according to the SNSF survey, they are still considered useful by candidates and reviewers. But in any case, even if these metrics were simply forbidden, reviewers can easily retrieve them online (DORA members 2020; FNR 2022), and it is even simpler as the SciCV infrastructure hosting the CV is directly connected to the candidate’s ORCID number.

### 5.4 Enlarge the spectrum of contributions and foster diversity and inclusion

In terms of broadening the range of contributions taken into account and fostering diversity and inclusion, although these objectives are clearly stated for all the pilot projects we identified, it would appear that the impact of the narrative CV on these aspects has not been assessed. This is not to say that there is no impact. The University of Glasgow (2021) notes that both CV writers and panel members see the narrative CV as an ‘opportunity’ to highlight a variety of contributions and thus increase the diversity of the research community. In the analysis they published, the NIHR (Meadmore et al. 2022) also speaks of the potential contributions of the narrative CV to wider research culture. In general, on these latter points,







